

(“Vindications of Self,” “Trancendence Through Causes and Beliefs. . .,” “Prison Conditions and Deprivations,” “Psychological Survival Through Communication and Relationships,” “Family Relationships and Motherhood. . .,” and “Solidarity with Other Women”) Scheffler has taken care not to let the wall-tappings fade to gray. The book contains poems, essays, journal entries, letters, a play, and several pieces of fiction that are billed as “highly autobiographical.” The diction ranges from ‘translationese’ to ‘high’ to regional to urban colloquial. What’s most important is that each of the writers appears to have succeeded not only in doing her own time (that wonderful American prison expression for using prison time as an opportunity for personal growth) but in preserving her own voice.

*Wall Tappings* underscores the common denominators that link women’s prison experience and hence their written descriptions of it, whether they have been jailed for drug-dealing or political action. Since, by definition, all ‘crimes’ are ‘against the State,’ the frequently-made assertion that all prisoners are political prisoners is proved true by simple deductive logic. This book piles up the inductive proof.

© 2004, Candice S. Rai.

## Inner Lives

### Voices of African American Women in Prison

Paula C. Johnson. New York: NYU Press, 2004. Paperback \$19.00

**Candice S. Rai, University of Illinois at Chicago**

The explosive growth in the U.S. prison and jail population over the past two decades, recently exceeding two million, has earned our country the highest imprisonment rate in the world. This increase is due in part to changes made in U.S. sentencing policy in the eighties and nineties during the height of the “War on Drugs,” which intensified the crack down on drug-related crimes. Many have argued that these legal revisions discriminate along class and race lines, exacerbating the already disproportionate representation in prisons of the nonwhite and the poor. Often hidden within discussions on this prison boom, however, is the radical increase in the number of women who have entered the system since 1980. Despite the lack of public attention paid to this concern, there is a burgeoning body of literature that dedicates itself to addressing issues pertaining to women in the criminal justice system. Authors such as Beth Richie, Kathryn Watterson, and Ann Stanford have addressed topics that range from the physical and mental health of incarcerated women to the living conditions within prisons, and from the efficacy of rehabilitation programs to the social circumstances that contribute to women’s criminality.

Paula C. Johnson, a professor of law at Syracuse University, joins this con-

versation with her new work *Inner Lives*. Johnson's central concern lies with the public invisibility of incarcerated African American women who make up the largest percentage of imprisoned women. Combining legal, historical and political analysis in a text that is part ethnography and part social critique, Johnson achieves a "multifaceted analysis of African American women's experiences in the US criminal justice and correctional systems" (12). *Inner Lives* is divided into three sections, which include a historical overview and analysis of penal law and the criminal justice system; first person narratives from incarcerated or formerly incarcerated women, their families, prison workers, activists and others; and recommendations for reform of prison law, correctional facilities and rehabilitation programs.

Johnson's methodology is inspired by Black feminist theory, which she argues places a priority on researching the effects of public policy and institutions on individual lives. She interviewed over one hundred incarcerated and formerly incarcerated African American women of all ages. The three-year interview process included women from different geographical regions whose crimes, punishments and institutional placements varied greatly. Johnson's commitment to privileging the voices and perspectives of these women is reflected in her choice to showcase their narratives as the core of her project. She includes twenty-three lengthy narratives by women who chronicle their experiences within the penal system and reflect on the conditions that led to their incarceration. These narratives, Johnson contends, have the power to restore agency to women whose civic lives have been effectively nullified by what many consider to be an unjust penal code.

The force of the narratives also lies in their ability to make visible the underlying conditions that often lead women to commit crime: poverty, histories of sexual and physical abuse, rape, drugs and mental illness. The individual stories combine to expose patterns of injustice and abuse. Further, these narratives expose the conditions of life in prison, which, as the women argue, often do not help facilitate rehabilitation. Johnson's choice to include photographs of each woman provides another avenue of "visibility." The women depicted in the photos are distinct in age, personality and general appearance. Whatever the public image of a prisoner might be, the visual presence of each woman works to demystify her identity and challenge assumptions made by readers.

The first and third chapters of *Inner Lives*, which frame the first-person narratives, can themselves be read as narratives that trace the historical-systemic disenfranchisement of African Americans by the U.S. legal system. Johnson begins with an historical overview of the ways in which race, class and gender have served as determining factors in criminal law and sentencing practices from the Colonial period to the present. For example, Johnson argues that the double standards of the current drug laws are legacies of the "slave codes" and the

Jim Crow era, both of which are instances where discriminatory biases were written into law. Johnson concludes her book with recommendations for addressing the concerns of incarcerated women, and more generally, for responding to what she identifies as discriminatory criminal laws. In sum, her recommendations focus on taking preventative measures for women at risk of imprisonment; developing stronger rehabilitation programs; offering social services specific to women, such as child and health care; and finally, challenging what she identifies as unjust practices within the criminal justice system itself.

*Inner Lives* will be of interest to many, including individuals researching the criminal justice system; those studying narrative and oral histories as a means of understanding how policy and institutions impact individuals; and scholars interested in how marginalized voices might gain public agency through self-expression. Johnson's call for more educational programming for incarcerated individuals should be of particular interest to researchers in Rhetoric and Composition. Research on and development of literacy-based service learning programs in prisons could be headed by these scholars, who have an already established history of critical pedagogy and literacy theory from which to build. For those interested in doing this type of activist fieldwork, Johnson includes in the appendix to her book an extensive list of organizations and advocacy groups who provide resources and information on prison reform, legal and social resources for prisoners, and current educational programming.

Ultimately, Johnson's book implies that the astonishing disparities in racial and class representation in prison point toward systemic injustices that need to be engaged on the level of law and prison reform, as well as through the activist work of individual educators and researchers.

## Sing Soft, Sing Loud

Patricia McConnel. Flagstaff, AZ: Logoria Books, 1995.

**Linda Caldwell**

Patricia McConnel's *Sing Soft, Sing Loud* had me captivated from the beginning to the end. The book is divided into two sections based on the two main characters, "Iva" and "Toni." These two women's stories drew me in. I found myself laughing aloud, tearing up in sadness and anger, and silently cheering them on. Although they are two totally different characters, they are very much the same, which is often the story of incarcerated women, regardless of what crime got them jailed.

The stories are followed by an "Afterword," which is very significant to the book. It is thought provoking and causes the reader to contemplate the why's: